

Colloquium “Improvisation, Collective Action, and the Arts of Activism”

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Montréal

Sala Rosa (4848, boul. St-Laurent)

Sponsored by the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation ([IICSI](#)),
the Post-graduate Students’ Society ([PGSS](#)) of McGill University,
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SUONI PER IL POPOLO



Conflated under an evocative seasonal trope, mobilizations as diverse as the 2011 Egyptian uprisings and the 2012 Quebec general strike have been identified as the sites of emergent political subjectivities and innovative activist practices that bring into tension ossified architectures of power. Many media and scholarly accounts of the Spring and Occupy movements of 2011-2012 celebrate their horizontal forms of decision-making, as well as their capacity for engaging with immediacy and for instantiating a politics of the future “that is not copied from the given or mapped in advance” (Al-Saji). The protest techniques and deliberative spaces associated with these mobilizations – e.g. casserole demonstrations, autonomous committees and neighborhood assemblies, encampments and arts-based interventions in central loci of urban public life – have often been portrayed as non-hierarchical, loosely organized modes of collective action that privilege the lived moment and the lived body over outcome-oriented forms of activism. When positively valenced, these modes of action are cast as propitious sites for the rehearsal of unmediated, egalitarian mechanisms of participation and for the cultivation of a set of ethical sensibilities that enable the recognition of marginalized voices and subjects. Seen in this light, autonomous neighborhood assemblies’ commitment to lengthy, horizontal deliberative processes appears, not as a mere procedural matter, but as a way of contesting the highly mediated, hierarchical forms of decision-making on which dominant models of representative democracy are predicated. Likewise, casserole demonstrations are construed as the collective sounding, not simply of discontent, but of an alternative ontological and epistemological politics, i.e., a politics concerned with waging a struggle over what voices are heard in the public sphere and how they are (de)coded.

The political, *poietic*, and ethical sensibilities foregrounded by these modes of collective action powerfully resonate with those improvisatory performance practices that emphasize the relational, processual construction of social spaces and the role of in-the-moment, embodied interactions in the transformation of preconceived schemas and habitual social/performance roles. Like the forms of activism described above, many improvisatory traditions in the arts give pride of place to egalitarian, dialogical dispositions and heightened forms of receptivity, especially to full-bodied listening practices, which are thought to facilitate the emergence of “unintelligible” or silenced voices. Moreover, the interconnections between these modes of art and activism go beyond a shared repertoire of political and ethical dispositions: on one hand, arts collectives and individual performers have played a key role in shaping various movements’ contentious tactics and deliberative processes. On the other hand, many activists have adopted arts-based protest techniques to appropriate public spaces, resignify their social function, and politicize the forms of exclusion that corporate, authoritarian, and instrumental rationalities naturalize.

These forms of art and activism have often coalesced in the context of mobilizations against a set of public policies that have come to be identified as neoliberal: fiscal austerity measures, the privatization of public services, the flexibilization of labor laws, and “the release of organizations and industries from government regulation” (Greenhouse 1). Generally inscribed within broader cosmopolitanist narratives (e.g. globalization and transnational free trade), these policies ostensibly draw on theories of market rationality and spontaneous social orders developed by scholars of economics

such as Friedrich von Hayek. Advocates of these policies tend to frame them as instruments of liberation (of market forces) and (individual) empowerment, through which the conditions for the emergence of a spontaneous social order are created. This utopian order is putatively free from the strictures of centralized, vertical power formations such as the state. It is an order in which agency and power are distributed in a diffuse fashion and enacted through lateral relationships among autonomous individuals, who are free to enter into mutually beneficial partnerships or communities of interest. Such communities are constituted through a process of mutual adjustment that entails the constant negotiation of roles, responsibilities, and objectives among actors with varying interests. In this highly improvisatory process that is subject to multiple contingencies, the outcomes are always “emergent” in the sense that R. Keith Sawyer gives to this term in his studies on group creativity: “emergence refers to collective phenomena in which ... ‘the whole is greater than the parts.’ . . . [E]mergent phenomena are unpredictable . . . and hard to explain in terms of the group’s components” (“Group Creativity” 148).

The neoliberal utopia of how partnerships and communities “emerge” is grounded in ideas of autonomy, freedom, agency, and risk-taking as a necessary condition for creativity and innovation. A multidisciplinary body of scholarship (McKenzie; Menger; Yúdice; Ross; Fuentes; Laver) has illuminated the intersections between this constellation of ideas and the imperative to perform and improvise that underpins the dominant ethos of creativity in many fields of cultural production. Building on this scholarship, this colloquium examines how the arts and activist practices that articulate a critique of neoliberal policies both resist, and overlap with, the rationalities that undergird those policies.

The colloquium brings together activists, artists, and scholars to critically interrogate the idea(l)s of autonomy, freedom, and agency that are central to neoliberal cultural formations and to the modes of collective action that contest those formations. What kinds of politics and communities have these idea(l)s translated into? How have the autonomous collectives that emerged in the wake of recent counterhegemonic mobilizations challenged the centrifugal modes of action and diffuse power structures fostered under neoliberalism? What are the political implications of neoliberalism’s valorization of spontaneous orders and risk-taking for counterhegemonic movements that look to improvisatory performance practices (and their attendant ethical sensibilities) as pathways towards the construction of radically democratic communities? How might the critical tools of improvisation studies and related fields of inquiry (e.g. performance and music studies, radical democratic theory, studies of collective action, popular education studies) serve to trouble neoliberal moves to “relax,” and “autonomize” agents from, governmental regulations? In what ways might we use those tools to bring to the fore improvisatory practices and processes that engage with alternative understandings of autonomy, agency, and risk-taking? How might the aesthetic and ethical gestures derived from, or inspired by, improvisatory traditions in the arts contribute to the politicization/denaturalization of neoliberal cultural norms?

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